



News

U.S. Rep. Adam Putnam (Fla.-12)

Central Florida: Hillsborough, Osceola and Polk counties

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Putnam guest column: UF must not forget its Land Grant mission

Editors please note: The following guest newspaper column by Congressman Adam H. Putnam was published today in The Gainesville Sun. It is 750 words long.

by Congressman Adam H. Putnam

Talk to anyone involved in Florida agriculture these days and you will hear about the recent controversy over the future of the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS). I think this debate offers a unique opportunity to review the role of research and technology transfer in our state and what one of the oldest industries in Florida can contribute in the 21st century. As one of my professors used to say, "This offers a teaching moment." This is really about the future of innovation in Florida and how UF can continue to play a unique and increasingly important leadership role for the entire state.

To fully appreciate what's at stake, some context is in order. UF/IFAS traces its roots back to the Morrill Act of 1862 which first established the Land Grant universities. The bold idea embodied in this legislation was that access to higher education – which had been the exclusive province of the elites – was essential to the success of American democracy. Toward that end, the legislation directed money from the sale of public lands to endow at least one public university in each state to "teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and mechanic arts," without excluding scientific, classical and military studies.

When he signed the Morrill Act into law, President Lincoln said, "The land grant university system is being built on behalf of the people who have invested in these public institutions their hopes, their support and their confidence."

The Land Grant system has been likened to a three legged stool: teaching, research and extension. It educates students, creates opportunities for high level research, and then extends that research back to the community at large.

Agriculture is an obvious focus of much of this effort. The profound impact of Land Grant university research is undeniable. In America today approximately 1.5 percent of the population is able to feed the other 98.5 percent. That's an incredible accomplishment – especially when placed in comparison to other nations around the world. What other industry can claim such efficiency?

It is research and the transfer of research-based knowledge that drives not only our stunning improvements in agricultural productivity but also improvements on a wide array of practical matters. The knowledge transfer through the university extension system is the ticket to greater consumer education about green energy, nutrition, homeownership, food safety, water conservation and even growth management.

In Florida, although we are a rapidly growing state, it would be a mistake to think that agriculture is of declining significance. Just a few weeks ago UF/IFAS released a new study that shows that even as the economy generally shows signs of weakening, the sectors of Florida's economy related to natural resources and agriculture continue to thrive. In fact, these sectors of Florida's economy represent a \$100 billion value-added impact on Florida's economy.

The UF researchers also noted that these industries manage two-thirds of Florida's land area, "land that is critical to water supplies, water quality, pollution abatement, erosion control, shoreline protection, carbon sequestration and climate stabilization, wildlife habitat and outdoor recreation."

In short, the research UF/IFAS engages in and shares directly impacts all Floridians. And that is true to the vision of Lincoln, even if he couldn't begin to imagine the specific kinds of research done today.

The Land Grant vision is directly responsible for transferring technology from the microscope to the field, from the beaker to the gas pump and from the lab bench to the dinner table.

Beyond agricultural research is the extending of that knowledge to the community at large. UF/IFAS has extension offices in each of Florida's 67 counties, including 13 research and education centers. That's access to and presence in the broader state community that any university system would covet. It is mind boggling to think that university leadership would consider scaling this back disproportionately.

The challenge for those who are involved in this profound technology transfer – both the providers and the recipients – is to speak up and remind the population at large and our legislative and educational leaders of both the legacy and opportunity embodied in the Land Grant mission. It is essential both to UF and the state that there is broad recognition that the land grant mission is the pathway to renown as a research institution, not an impediment.

U.S. Rep. Adam Putnam is a 1995 graduate of the University of Florida and represents the 12th Congressional District, which includes portions of Hillsborough, Osceola and Polk counties.

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